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# LBJ Memoir Tells of '64 War Plans

By Brian Donovan  
Newsday

Lyndon Johnson's still unpublished White House memoirs acknowledge that his administration was privately preparing in early 1964 for large-scale American military involvement in Vietnam, long before the depth of the U.S. commitment was known to the public.

The memoirs, to be published in November, support many of the findings of the classified Pentagon study of the war's origins, which the government has been fighting to keep secret. The former President's book, largely in galley form at the New York publishing house of Holt, Rinehart & Winston, is entitled "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency." Newsday obtained information about the material from a publishing source.

Johnson depicts himself in the book as having been hesitant for several months over approving military advisers' recommendations for bombing raids against North Vietnam. But in February of 1965, he writes, he told aides that he was approving the bombing. "We have kept our gun over the mantel and our shells in the cupboard for a long time now," I said. "And what was the result? They are killing our men while they sleep in the night. I can't ask American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs."

In the book, Johnson says that he first decided to pursue President Kennedy's policy of defending South Vietnam's sovereignty while flying back to Washington only a few hours after Kennedy's assassination.

In the highlights of his chapters on Vietnam, portraying more than five years of growing U.S. involvement, Johnson says:

- On March 17, 1964, he approved a recommendation by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara that U.S. forces should be prepared for a "program of graduated military pressure against the North."

- During the 1964 presidential campaign, Robert Kennedy volunteered to go to South Vietnam as the U.S. ambassador.

- During the same campaign, all that he meant by his often-quoted statement that he would not send U.S. troops "to do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves" was that America should not "take charge" of the war or provoke a conflict with China. "I did not mean that we were not going to do any fighting, for we had already lost many good men in Vietnam."

- In September, 1964, Johnson approved a contingency plan for bombing, recommended by the military, to be implemented if Communist forces made a "spectacular" attack in the South. But he then waited until Feb. 7, 1965, to start bombing, twice rejecting advice from military advisers to begin earlier.

- On Feb. 17, 1965, Johnson met with former President Eisenhower and was urged to mount a "campaign of pressure" against the North.

- About three weeks after the first major battle involving American ground troops in a campaign in June, 1965, Johnson authorized a 25,000-man troop increase to 75,000. He writes, "I was convinced that your retreat from this challenge would open the path to World War III."

- At the 1967 Glassboro Summit Conference, Soviet Premier Kosygin told Johnson that if the United States stopped bombing, peace negotiations would start, but no mutually agreeable terms for pursuing that peace feeler could be reached.

Johnson prefaces his chronology of his Vietnam decisions

by saying, "I have not written these chapters to say, 'This is how it was,' but to say, 'This is how I saw it from my vantage point.'"

In 1964, while taking the steps that led to an extensive U.S. military effort in Vietnam, Johnson writes, "I had moments of deep discouragement, times when I felt that the South Vietnamese were their own worst enemies. The South Vietnamese seemed to have a strong impulse toward political suicide."

Johnson's portrait of his early policy-making stance coincides to a certain extent with the picture drawn in the leaked Pentagon study, indicating a President considering plans for major military operations while hesitating at several points to put those plans into effect. That picture becomes particularly clear in Johnson's account of the steps leading to the U.S. bombing raids.

Although no "formal" bombing proposal had been advanced by his advisers during his first year in the White House, Johnson writes, "the idea of hitting North Vietnam with air power, either on a reprisal basis or in a sustained campaign, had been discussed inside the government, in Saigon and in the American press for some time . . ."

According to the classified Pentagon study that has

surfaced in recent days, the President, in June of 1964, considered "the political conventions just around the corner and the election issues regarding Vietnam clearly drawn." So he held back, the study said, from seeking any major escalation and from seeking any congressional approval of it.

Then, on Sept. 9, 1964, a little more than a month after the Tonkin Gulf incidents, Johnson received recommendations from the State and Defense Departments, he writes, supporting the bombing of the North. Johnson says that he ordered that contingency plans for such raids be prepared.

"Acting on (that) order, the military force made plans to retaliate by air against the North if the North Vietnamese or Vietcong hit U.S. forces or carried out some kind of 'spectacular' attack in South Vietnam," he writes. "Twice before the year was out, I asked to put those contingency plans into effect."

The first time, he writes, was an attack on an air base at Bienhoa; the second, the bombing of an American officers' billet in Saigon. It was not until February of 1965, when an attack on a U.S. base at Pleiku killed eight Americans, however, that the strikes were finally authorized, he writes.